

Opening Statement
The Honorable Adrian Smith, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Technology and Innovation
Committee on Science and Technology
U.S. House of Representatives

*Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States: the Role of the National Institute of
Standards and Technology*

March 10, 2009

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing today on the very important issue of forensic science. Many if not most of the issues we undertake in this subcommittee have direct implications well beyond our scientific and technological enterprise. Forensic science is no different, but it is of particularly unique importance in that it is a key factor in the fundamental functioning of our justice system.

This importance has only increased in recent years through the advancement of new technologies that have enabled forensics to contribute a growing amount of information to law enforcement investigations as well as courtroom proceedings. These advances have undoubtedly improved our ability to not only identify and convict the guilty, but also exclude the innocent.

However, as the National Academy of Sciences report on strengthening forensic science demonstrates, continued improvement is necessary to maximize the quality of—and our corresponding confidence in—forensic evidence that is used the courtroom.

The NAS report's core finding—that many forensic disciplines are in need of more rigorous scientific review to validate their accuracy and reliability—is very serious, and requires the full and immediate attention of Congress, the justice system, and the forensic science community.

But it is important to remember the absence of rigorous scientific underpinning in many forensic disciplines does not mean these methods are inaccurate or unreliable; it simply means they are in need of evaluation. Accordingly, I think it is important to recognize the enormous value forensic evidence provides to the justice system even in the absence of full scientific validation, and accordingly exercise caution to ensure we are not overly dismissive of forensic evidence.

The immediate focus of this hearing today, however, is to review the scientific and technical recommendations of the NAS report and discuss how they can best be addressed, particularly through the National Institute of Standards and Technology, which has the programs and expertise to be a key driver of improvements in forensic science.

I thank the witnesses for being here, and I look forward to a productive discussion.

One final item—Mr. Chairman, I have here a letter from the National District Attorneys Association that we received yesterday. I think it provides important perspective to this issue and I would like to ask unanimous consent that it be included in the hearing record.